

Matthew 16: 21-28
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 30, 2026
The Rev. Katherine M. Bush

You might expect I would return in praise of rest and ease. And I can assure you that I have enjoyed a beautiful rest and many easy days since I saw you last. My gratitude abounds, and I'm happy to share sabbatical stories with you over the coming weeks. But this is not a sermon about the place of sabbath rest in our lives, important, crucial though that oft-forgotten practice is. Instead, I'd like to talk about friction and to praise it. We need friction, while we are living in a world that wants to become frictionless. But let's back up.

The last time we saw Jesus talking to Satan in Matthew's account, they were in the wilderness. And after being tempted three times over, Jesus said, "Away with you, Satan." It is in Luke's version that we get the foreshadowing note that the devil departed merely *until a more opportune time*. And here Satan is again, not appearing as a mysterious desert vision, but embedded in an earnest conversation with one of Jesus' closest friends. Peter listens to Jesus talk about suffering, and like any of us might say to our dear ones, "God, I hope not! I don't want you to hurt or struggle or die." It's a common human thing to say, and such a tender human desire. For the people I love? I want a smooth path. I want things to be easy. I want them to stay safe. And in a variety of ways Peter often seeks the path of security for himself and for Jesus: he proposes three tents to stay near Moses and Elijah on the mountain, he draws his sword in the garden when soldiers arrive, he denies he's part of the suspect community around Jesus. Peter, like any other self-preserving, rational human, wants to save his own life, and if he can, to save Jesus' life too.

Moving toward safety is rightly a strong human instinct, and let me assure you that the voice keeping us away from hot stoves and from driving too fast is not the voice of Satan. Still, there is something about so craving security that it can get twisted. bell hooks, African-American feminist, poet, and scholar, reminds us that, "the practice of love offers no place of safety. We risk loss, hurt, pain." She sounds surprisingly like C.S. Lewis: "to love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one ..."

Jesus set his heart and his mind on divine things: chiefly on the practice of love, and this means he will not stay safe. It's not that he courts danger or is some kind of foolhardy daredevil, and he's certainly not a sadist. Rather, Jesus simply walks through the world; he develops deep friendships; he is part of a family; he stops and stoops to understand those who are sick or unwanted. And living and loving this way will not offer him a place of safety. Following this path through ordinary life and into these everyday connections means that he will be vulnerable to loss and sorrow, discomfort and pain. Instead of retreating to a palace or even to a mountaintop tent, Jesus stumbles through the world with all the inherent risks that come from caring about the world, from loving others, and from knowing that our time here is limited. So, you see, even before the authorities come for him, he is already undergoing suffering; he is already losing his life for the sake of the whole world.

In an essay called the “Anti-Social Century” from a year or so ago, Derek Thompson describes our tendency to “engineer the friction [of daily life] away” to make life more efficient, seamless even. He explains that “for decades, we’ve adopted whatever technologies removed friction or increased dopamine, embracing what makes life feel easy and good in the moment. But dopamine is a chemical, not a virtue. And what’s easy is not always what’s best for us... [because] friction was never only friction. It was the container for connection.” Friction, technically, involves tension and pressure at the point of contact; it means abrasion as one object meets another object, feeling something as we encounter another. Friction is the container for connection. So often, I think we believe we’re doing something wrong when there’s a cost - a cost of time or of attention, and especially when there’s a cost of struggle or discomfort. The world around us is seemingly working hard to make sure we don’t have to work hard - whether that’s contactless payment or AI-everything and automated everything. But what if feeling something is actually the whole point? What if, as Thompson suggests, “convenience becomes a curse” as we insulate our lives and isolate ourselves?

Peter is just the unlucky one who goes on the record, but he speaks for most (if not all) of us at one time or another. I’ll take the glide path and not the climb, thank you. Isn’t there a faster, more convenient way? Isn’t there a messiah who only wins and never loses? Couldn’t we follow without lugging a cross too? This path Jesus is on seems the opposite of efficient and seamless. And it’s certainly not heading toward a place of safety.

Hiding within most temptations is often a core goodness that’s gone awry. And that is true in this moment of temptation for Peter and for Jesus. It’s not intrinsically wrong to want security and comfort. There is wisdom in finding protection, sometimes in taking caution, often in easing pain. No one, not even Jesus, is suggesting that we manufacture or revel in suffering; we don’t suffer because we deserve it or because God wills it. It’s simply the case that suffering is part of living, because it’s part of loving. The risk of having a broken heart comes with having a heart to start with. And the temptation to avoid grief, disappointment, and even pain can mean that we try to avoid connection in the first place. So we do everything we can to smooth out all the rough edges, even if we erase everything of interest when we do. But when our desire for security and safety goes into overdrive, when our defenses are so high and become so strong and impenetrable, when we have engineered our days so that we rarely bump up against anyone, we can look around and discover that we are living in an airless isolation chamber.

Instead, we are challenged by Christ to venture living in and loving this rough world. We risk the inconvenience of encounter, the friction of relationships, the peril of vulnerability, the cumbersome nature of taking up a cross. “The practice of love offers no place of safety,” but safety was never the promise on offer anyway. The promise was and is still finding life, finding our lives in this precarious world with all these risky people. The promise was and is love, wrung out and quite unsafe. To gain everything, we turn our backs on the temptation to hide away in guarded rooms and to close off our hearts. You and I and Peter watch Jesus go to Jerusalem without a shield and toward love without defense, and then we follow him.