

Simon the supportive: Matthew 16:21-27

Peter tries to be supportive. Jesus calls him Satan.

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [August 11, 1999](#) issue

Sixteen years old, stubborn to see the world for myself, I embarked on my first reading of the four Gospels. How it struck me to realize that Jesus of Nazareth, the "Lord" of the Lord's Prayer, was not in league with every person or in favor of every value esteemed in my world or my parents' world. He was not, after all, a member in good standing of that club that included Walt Disney, Betty Crocker, President Nixon and my Uncle Louie. In fact, in one way or another Jesus would undoubtedly have irritated every single one of them. This is a recognition from which I have never fully recovered.

And it recurs over time. All that changes is the company of which I have too readily made Jesus a member, the values that I have too easily sanctioned in his name. I suppose we all do this. We place Jesus on a mental guest list with "our sort," only to have him say or do something that puts the entire party out of sorts. He is with us to the ends of the earth, yes, but on another level you can't take him anywhere.

The exchange between Jesus and Peter recorded in the 16th chapter of Matthew illustrates the point. Jesus has informed his disciples that he is going to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Peter brushes aside this prediction and is called Satan. And for what? For obeying what is surely one of the Ten Commandments, if not the Golden Rule, of our culture: "Thou shalt always be supportive."

Few words are more venerated these days than "supportive"; few failings more reviled than that of not offering support. To be deemed "unsupportive" is to be damned as unloving, unlovable—unchristian.

Yet when we listen carefully to what often passes for "support," we hear a distinct echo of Simon Peter. We hear someone offering another person one of two bogus assurances: that nothing bad can befall her, or that she is incapable of doing

anything bad. "Oh, Grandma, don't talk that way! You'll outlive us all." Or: "Don't be so hard on yourself, Grandma. You have good intentions, Grandma." The better to eat you with, my dear.

In rejecting Peter's "support," in going so far as to imply that it is satanic, Jesus tells us something about the nature of evil itself. From what do most evils arise if not from a false notion of one's own innocence or a false notion of one's own invulnerability? If we destroy our planet, we can always blast off to another one. And we don't really mean to destroy our planet: the air, the water and the soil are unavoidable casualties of our laudable human striving to be better and better in every day and in every way. It's an old story, of course. "You shall not die, but be as gods, knowing good from evil." *Now the serpent was the most supportive of the beasts that the Lord God had made . . .*

Jesus's approach to reality and to relationships is far more bracing. He shares with his friends a prediction of the worst that can happen, and he invites them to embrace their destiny with courage, to carry their crosses as his companions. In the end, Grandma is going to die. Grandma does need to come to terms with the wolf that has always dressed itself in her nightgown. Maybe we need to "get behind her"—and out of her way—by ceasing to play the role of supportive Satan to her suffering Christ.

One problem with many forms of "support" is that they tend to be based more on the supported person's attributed good luck or presumed good heart than on the supporter's abiding love. If nothing's ever wrong, you see, if nothing can go wrong, if my friend never does any wrong, then there is no call for me to make a commitment or a sacrifice. In some ways, support like Peter's is actually a disclaimer. If Jesus isn't going to be crucified, then Peter doesn't need to risk being crucified with him. If you're always OK, then I'm always OK—that is, I'm safe from any claim you might make upon me that costs more than a few glibly "nonjudgmental" words of "support." Really, does it take any extrasensory perception on Jesus' part for him to predict Peter's triple denial on the eve of his crucifixion?

Faithfulness is made of stronger stuff. Several years ago I was anticipating what was likely to be an unpleasant meeting between myself and some of my daughter's teachers. I was ready for war. I rehearsed for my wife's benefit the things I'd say, threaten to do, carry out if certain matters weren't settled at once. "But as I raged and grew more fierce and wild" (to use poet George Herbert's words), my wife

looked into my face and said, "Remember who you are."

It was an especially sobering remark coming from the person who better than anyone knows who I am, for better and for worse. I suppose I could have faulted her for failing to be supportive. In fact, she was reminding me of the person that she continued to love and believe in, even as he was carrying on like a lunatic. I have spoken her words to myself many times since, always imagining them in her voice.

Simon Peter is performing an office exactly the opposite of the one my wife performed for me. In effect, he is saying to Jesus, "Forget who you are." And Jesus responds, in effect, by saying, "To hell with your support." Nevertheless, we should not fail to hear the invitation that comes with the rebuke. When Jesus characterizes Simon as Satan, he does so in the hope that one day he might be able to rely on him as friend.