

Peter: What a Role Model!

In preparing for today's sermon, I discovered that many well-known artists have been fascinated by the Apostle Peter. I'm indebted to Jenn Leever who helped prepare the presentation that illustrates part of Peter's life.

I'm going to begin by asking you to share with me some of the events that you recall from Peter's life. (Pause to allow time for responses from the congregation.)

Some of you have mentioned negative things about his life and others positive events. The negative events are representative of human foibles such as exist in all of us, aren't they? Others remember when Peter acted really positively. Many of those events occurred after Jesus had restored and forgiven him, and he had become a new Peter, humble and confident. The Holy Spirit had given him this confidence to become a powerful, dynamic speaker and leader.

If we examine Peter's life, we can learn from his example and become a more dynamic Christian because we too are restored and forgiven by Jesus. Let's look at this outstanding disciple in more detail.

Where did he come from and what did he look like? The gospels tell us that he was married, had three children and lived at Bethsaida, near the fishing village of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee. His father Jona and his brother Andrew along with their partners (the apostles James and John) were all fishermen. It was while they were fishing that Jesus called them to "follow me, and I will make you 'fishers of men'." An indication of his Galilean background is that apparently he had an accent that was typical of Galilee. His house is still standing probably because, in the fifth century, a

Christian church was constructed over it. We are told that he was a slender man of middle size with a pale complexion. He had a short, thick, curled beard and thin eyebrows. He was a fluent speaker, eloquent and dramatic. He was also a natural and inspirational leader of men, a quick thinker but not a deep reasoner.

About a month ago when our good friend Rev. Tom Hoffman preached, about the first half of his sermon dealt with Peter. I had this sermon partially prepared at the time, and I began to think that he'd stolen my sermon! One of the incidents that he described about Peter was when Jesus asked Peter to push the boat into the water so that he could preach to the people. Peter didn't say, "Let my brother Andy do it, or go push it out yourself." Instead he obediently responded to the stranger Jesus and pushed the boat into the water. Soon afterwards when the fishermen had been unsuccessful in catching any fish, Jesus ordered them to cast their nets again, and they caught hundreds of fish. Rev. Hoffman pointed out that Peter cried, "Oh, yes, you are the Lord! But I'm not a good man at all. Please just leave me alone!" However, Jesus recognized qualities in Peter of which Peter himself was unaware.

Most of Jesus' disciples remain largely silent in the gospels. We remember Thomas who spoke out about not believing that Jesus was alive unless he could see the marks of the nails in Jesus' hands. Judas is remembered for his infamous betrayal of Jesus, "Greetings, Teacher," before he kissed him. When Philip told Nathanael that they had found "the very person that Moses and the other prophets wrote about," it was Nathanael who said, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" There may be one or two incidents where an apostle seems to come alive and speak, but Peter is quoted throughout the entire New Testament. In fact, he may be the most

fleshed-out character in the gospels. His failings are “treated as symptoms of man’s state of sinfulness or weakness which can be overcome through faith in Jesus.”

The failing that we probably tend to remember the most is his denial of Jesus--not just once but three times. At the Last Supper, when Jesus said that one of them would betray him, Peter replied, “Even if everyone else deserts you, I never will.” However, at the very end of the same chapter in Mark, Peter is warming himself by a fire when a servant girl says, “You were one of those with Jesus the Nazarene.” Peter responds, “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” and the rooster crowed. The servant girl then tells others that Peter was with Jesus, and again he denies it which was again followed by a rooster’s crow. Finally, some others in the crowd (apparently recognizing his accent) said, “You must be one of them because you’re from Galilee.” Once again he answered, “I swear by God, I don’t know this man you’re talking about.”

After the rooster crowed for the third time, Peter recalled Jesus’ prediction about his denial before the cock crowed three times. Mark records that Peter broke down and wept. In fact, in one description of Peter, it is said that his eyes were often red from crying. He never forgot Jesus’ lesson about forgiving the wrongdoer, not only seven times but seventy times seven. He thought much about these impressions of the Master’s forgiving character during those dark and dismal days immediately following his thoughtless and unintended denial of Jesus in the high priest’s courtyard.

How much more human can a man be than to promise to be faithful and honest only to break down under pressure and commit a sin? Don’t we sometimes agree to a responsibility and then find it easier not to fulfill what

we promised to do? In the wedding vows, people promise to be faithful but when tempted, especially if a marriage is struggling, they turn to someone else who seems understanding and thereby commit adultery. As parents, we expect to give love and time to our kids, but when work or activities outside the home call us, we excuse ourselves to our kids and send them off to their activities with others. In our baptismal vows we promise to bring our children up in the church, but sometimes we find it easier to stay at home on Sundays.

We certainly can see ourselves in Peter in the incident where he tries to walk on water. In Matthew 14 the disciples are all frightened during a storm when they see a shadowy figure walking towards them. When Peter realized that the figure was indeed Jesus, he responded to Christ's invitation to come to him. At first, his faith was strong and he was able to actually walk towards Jesus, but, when the wind and waves battered him, he began to sink until Jesus rescued him.

We, like Peter, have strong faith when things are going smoothly, but when we become worried or afraid, we also sink as we're battered by life's difficulties. I'm sure that many people who are struggling in this difficult economic time may lose faith that God is omnipresent and that Jesus will help them through if they can maintain a strong faith.

When Judas arrived in the olive grove with a battalion of the leading priests and Pharisees, they were questioning Jesus' identity. Jesus realized all that was going to happen to him and answered honestly that he was indeed the one they were looking for. At that point Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of Malchus who was one of the servants of the high priest.

When Peter, James, and John were with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane while he was praying, they fell asleep rather than praying as he did. Even in his agony, they were being human. Jesus said to Peter, “Couldn’t you stay awake and watch with me even one hour? Keep alert and pray. Otherwise temptation will overpower you. For though the spirit is willing enough, the flesh is weak.”

The above two incidents illustrate Peter’s impulsiveness as he cuts off the servant’s ear and his lack of strength when he falls asleep, rather than supporting his lord in his agony. Yet, in today’s scripture God reveals to Peter that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. He’s the very first person to make that recognition. When Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter immediately replies, “You are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Jesus then tells him, “You are blessed, Simon, because my Father in Heaven has revealed this to you. Now I say to you that you are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church.” It’s as if Jesus said to him: “Peter, you are the first man to grasp who I am; you are therefore the first stone, the foundation stone, the very beginning of the Church which I am founding.” In a source called “Jesus Christ in the Urantia Book” I also found this statement from Jesus to his disciples which illustrates the point in today’s scripture. “And when, therefore, you make this confession by the insight of the spirit of my Father which dwells within you, I am led to declare that upon this foundation will I build the brotherhood of the eternal realities of my Father’s kingdom.” Peter and the rest of the disciples are truly recognizing Jesus’ divinity, as well as the task ahead of them in building the church.

Jesus has forgiven Peter for his human frailties and places a major responsibility on his shoulders. As a result of this trust in him, Peter becomes a changed man who takes on the responsibilities which God and

Jesus expected of him. If Peter hadn't lived up to God and Jesus' faith in him, the church probably wouldn't exist today.

In the days that followed he preached to the masses in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. He concluded by saying, "So let it be known by everyone in Israel that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified to be both Lord and Messiah!" When he was finished, in Acts 2:41, it is written that "Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church—about three thousand in all." God's faith in Peter came to fruition quickly. Later he was able to heal a forty-year-old man who had been crippled from birth by saying to him, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Still later he defended the inclusion of the Gentiles into the Christian Church at the apostolic Council in Jerusalem. He also traveled as a missionary to Lydda, Joppa, and Caesarea.

What a contrast to his earlier impulsive behavior. God's and Jesus' faith in him brought forth his very best strengths. The same can be true of us if we recognize that we are forgiven and that God expects us to respond to his guidance. In the Romans scripture for today, we hear "Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is."

According to William Barclay, "we are called to occupy a leading place. Paul says that if we are so called, we must do it with zeal. One of the most difficult problems of the Church today is the getting of leaders in all departments of its work. There are fewer and fewer people with a sense of service and of responsibility, willing to give up their leisure and their

pleasure to undertake leadership. There are, for example, two ways in which a teacher may prepare a lesson—with heart and mind or in the most perfunctory way. A man may dully and drably go through some task in the church, or he may do it with the joy and thrill of zeal. The Church today needs leaders with zeal in their hearts.” The church’s nominating committee is currently working on preparing a slate of elders and deacons for the years ahead. I challenge any of you who’s asked to take on these responsibilities to be willing to undertake leadership positions with energy and zeal.

I’d like to share a real-life story that I think illustrates how people respond when placed in a challenging situation. As you know, last fall Haiti was faced with a terrible cholera epidemic. My friend Maureen, a full-time missionary, sent out an email saying that the mission was working hard to plan how the clinic could best meet the needs when the cholera actually reached them. They determined how they would confine the patients to areas outside the mission walls, what medicines they would need, etc. A husband and wife couple who were nurses worked hard in the planning phase before the epidemic actually reached them. However, when the disease was at its peak and the mission was overwhelmed with patients and needed as much medical help as possible, those two never appeared and didn’t help. Others who hadn’t been in on the planning but arrived at the height of the disease, not realizing what they were getting into, jumped in with both hands, spent long hours in the dirty work of giving IV’s and medicines and cleaning up the messes, etc. They were like Peter in that they responded to God’s call with the kind of zeal that God asks of us.

In preparing to speak today, I came across a sermon entitled, “Peter: The Man God Uses” by David Go. He said that he had always thought that Peter was not qualified to be chosen by God because he was disorganized,

impulsive, emotional, temperamental, uneducated, argumentative, proud and arrogant. Those adjectives don't seem to describe the kind of man that God would call for such an important ministry.

However, Mr. Go, in studying Luke 5, began to see that the Lord recognized that Peter's heart had the right qualifications for the role which he played as the foundation of Christ's church. It was God in today's scripture that caused Peter to recognize Christ as the Son of God. According to Mr. Go, it was because Peter had special qualities in his heart that he was chosen to carry out God's plan to found the church. His heart was selfless, obedient, teachable, repentant, and believing, just the qualities God and Jesus were looking for." For example, according to one source, Peter did more than any other one man, aside from Paul, to establish the kingdom and send its messengers to the four corners of the earth in one generation.

Let us, like Peter, respond with zeal and energy to whatever God is calling us to do. I pray that God will see in us a repentant heart for our mistakes and provide us with a genuine, active faith like Peter's so that we can truly be called His servants. Amen.