

Once upon a time there was a girl named Petra. Petra was a typical teenager—lots of attitude and angst—but her misdemeanors were tame compared to some. She was quiet and shy but yearned to be liked, to have friends, to be the life of the party. She just didn't quite know how to make that happen, or what would happen if she ever was the life of the party. She imagined her life being an unending gaggle of parties and laughter and never being alone (unless she chose to be.) Petra also wanted to please people, which she thought would make them like her and that through those friendships she'd be cool

Petra's bestie was called Judy and she was everything Petra was not. Blonde, perky, outgoing. Fun to be with, kind of wild. Petra and Judy would go to the mall and hang out with the other kids in the town where they lived. Boys were there, they'd see kids from their school and kids from rival schools, they'd go to the movies and eat at the deli. Killing time, pretending to be grown up, trying to navigate that shark tank that was junior high.

Smoking was the cool thing among kids in Petra and Judy's circle; smoking made them look grown up, they imagined; older and more sophisticated than they were. Of course the parents didn't want them smoking but that just made it more exciting, getting smokes on the sly, smoking at the mall, trying to look cool. Spraying on the Jordache or the Charlie perfume to hide the smell, chewing gum and mints to cover up their smoker's breath. If the parents ever asked they'd say, Oh, we saw so-and-so and she/ he was smoking, it must have got on us.

This went on until one day they were at the mall; Judy had brought a pack of cigs in her purse that she'd gotten from her older boyfriend; and just as she got them out Judy's mom walked up and that was the end of that. Judy's mom was so mad and to cover herself Judy said the cigs belonged to *Petra* and Judy was just carrying them for her. Of course Judy's mom believed her and told Petra that she was talking them home and she'd be calling Petra's mother about this.

Betrayal. We've all done it, we will all probably do it again. Although some of you I can't imagine being a betrayer or a liar or having ever gotten into any trouble at all—but I know that everyone in this room is an imperfect human being and capable of every kind of betrayal (in the right circumstance.) I've talked about betrayal several times during the Lenten season and the Easter season because betrayal is what is revolving around the crucifixion of Jesus and what the resurrection is made to heal.

We all think of Judas as the ultimate betrayer. He was the one, after all, who gave Jesus over to the authorities for a paltry sum. He payed a price, though, in guilt and shame. In realization that he had done wrong. In taking his own life. I have to wonder, what might have happened if Judas had not taken his own life, if he had repented and returned to the disciples. Would they have taken him in? Forgiven and loved him? I wonder.

But there were other betrayers. Once Jesus was arrested the rest of the disciples couldn't get away fast enough. Peter, of course, was among them, maybe second from the top of the list. Jesus even predicted it: "before the rooster crows three times this morning you will deny that you know me." We all think we know what we'll do in any given situation, even in any situation of danger. Peter *thought* he knew what he'd do—"I'll never deny knowing you, Lord!" and yet when the chips were down he didn't follow through. Couldn't follow through. He also felt guilt and shame. Payed a price in knowing he had done wrong, that he had betrayed his friend. But his response was very different than Judas'.

Once the crucifixion was over the disciples regathered in the room where they had last seen Jesus. They huddled together, fearful for their lives, until Jesus made his resurrection known. And maybe it was the guilt and shame that made them commit so fiercely when Jesus asked for new promises from

them: go out into the world and tell everyone the good news and make disciples and teach what I have taught you—to love one another. With the reappearance of Jesus all was forgiven. The betrayals forgotten. The work yet to begin.

What we notice about the book of Acts is that Peter is the new leader from the very beginning, just as Jesus had predicted. From the time of Pentecost Peter is the one we see stepping out as Jesus commissioned the disciples to do—I'm sure the others did the same but Peter is the leader. This going out reminds me of early on in Jesus' ministry when he sent the disciples out in pairs, offering peace to the houses where they stayed and telling the good news to those who would listen. This is still the job of the disciples but they no longer have Jesus, they have Peter.

But Peter seems to have grown up during this time. Tragedy makes that happen sometimes. And so when the Holy Spirit comes on the disciples at Pentecost and when the lame man by the temple gate needs healing it is Peter who is there to interpret what has happened.

We begin to see a pattern, here in the first part of Acts—a pattern that will shape and mold the early church and lead to radical growth in the church. In a way it follows the pattern of Jesus' ministry: there is a problem, perhaps a demon possession or a healing needed; care is given and healing happens; then it is revealed that the healing has happened through Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah.

Maybe it happens first *with* Peter. After all, he denied knowing Jesus, denied being a follower of Jesus three times. Swore, even. Along with Judas he is the betrayer, the one who lets Jesus down. He isn't there when Jesus is hauled off to stand before the Sanhedrin. He isn't there when the crowds cry "crucify him!" He isn't there when Jesus dies, crying out to God "why have you forsaken me?" knowing that his followers are the ones who have truly let him down. When Peter realizes what he has done, he is broken. Judas, too, but Judas' brokenness takes him down a different path. Peter's brokenness leads him to repent, to acknowledge what he has done, to go back to the room where the other disciples were and share the grief and sorrow that they're all feeling.

Then Jesus appears and all are healed. And they are sent out to witness to their brokenness, their healing and the reason they are healed—the love of Jesus Christ. And Peter continues this pattern, witnessing to the people after Pentecost—you know, the ones who sneered that the disciples were drunk—and then another healing and a witness, and then the man by the gate is healed and Peter again witnesses to the power of Jesus Christ that has healed the man.

This is Peter at his best, filled with the Holy Spirit. Placed in the midst of an unfriendly, if not openly hostile crowd, he answers their question without defending himself. "By what power did you do this?" they ask; and Peter could have said something like, "why should I answer that?" or "Why not? I am now filled with God's power" but instead he spoke only of the name of Jesus Christ. As Barbara Brown Taylor says of this scene, Peter is finally done denying him.

We go on with this theme in our text from I John. The power of Jesus shows in the love we have for one another, the love we have for our neighbors—especially those in need. My favorite line from this passage, I think, is this: "how does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action." To me this speaks directly to our time, to the wealthy few who cut programs for the poor and needy while giving tax cuts to their wealthy friends. It speaks to the habit some leaders have of sending "thoughts and prayers" in place of relief funding after disaster and tragedy, in place of laws to protect citizens from poisoned water and land. To the so called Christian leaders who look the other way as these things are happening.

Perhaps I shouldn't talk about government and politics in a sermon. But when I hear Peter standing up to the Sanhedrin, who were only trying to keep the Romans off their backs and keep the Pax Romana in place, who feared the Jesus movement because it threatened that peace; when I read John's letter to his people and know that when he says, "we know what love is, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" that John is speaking from first-hand experience, he *knows* what love is in that context because he is one of the "us" that Jesus laid down his life for; then I become angry at the waste of opportunities to love that go on in this country and around the world every day. Opportunities to love are wasted when taxes are cut that support social programs; opportunities to love are wasted when we aren't asked to sacrifice our own interests for the sake of children who need clean water and decent school buildings and textbooks; we waste opportunities to love and show the love of Christ when we don't support regulation of firearms and make it possible for everyone to have access to decent healthcare.

I'll tell you a secret that I think Jesus knew: when we act in the interest of others, when we sacrifice something of ourselves, something important to us, we are acting in our own interest as well; because contrary to popular opinion it isn't individual strength that makes this country great, it is communities of people working together, sharing what they have, doing for others and having others do for them. We are stronger when we work together than we are separately and individually because we have different strengths and weaknesses but they all fit together into one large beautiful body, the body of Christ.

Peter, the character who was so brash, so impulsive in our gospel stories, turns out to be a hero not because he healed a man but because he has learned how to embrace the love of Christ and share it with the world. Even today it can be hard to be an unapologetic Christian, to claim not our own power but the power of Christ in us, to sacrifice for others in his name. But we can do it because we have a heroic example in Peter, and a well-articulated witness by John. It is up to us to follow their lead. Amen.