

Oh, Peter...! Mark 8:27-38 September 16, 2018

Several years ago there was a boy in my daughter's youth group named Peter. Peter was a nice young man, but like many adolescent boys he was kind of impetuous—often speaking and doing things without thinking first. But one thing you could say about Peter—he always kept things interesting!

I remember the first year that kids of Jenny's age could go to Montreat. They were rising 9th graders and all very excited. Now if you've been to Montreat you know how beautiful it is there, with the mountains and trees, and a small lake right in the middle of the community. This isn't a swimming lake, it's just for canoeing and paddleboating. But a beautiful lake nonetheless.

Well, again, as with boys of that age Peter liked the ladies and would go to great lengths to get their attention; and there was a group of girls at Montreat that year who were flirting with Peter and who I think he wanted to impress; and at one point during the week they dared Peter—knowing that it was against the rules to do this—they dared him to jump into Lake Susan. And he did.

Oh, Peter. What would we do without you?

Just a note: today Peter has grown up into a nice young man, a Marine who has served in Afghanistan, a young man we can all be proud of. I'm not sure if he would still jump in the lake on a dare, but...

There is a Peter in our gospel lesson for today, too—a Peter we're all too familiar with. A Peter who is also impetuous. A Peter who often seems to speak or act first and think later—if at all. A Peter who Jesus has called to follow him, and yet who we aren't sure really knows who he's following or why.

To set the scene, we remember that just before this Jesus once again encounters great crowds who then need to be fed. The disciples gather up 7 baskets of leftovers from this great event; and then they all pile into a boat and head across the sea of Galilee. When they get to land he is taken to a blind man, who is healed by his touch. All along Jesus is frustrated by the disbelief of the Pharisees and the misunderstanding of the disciples. After all of this has happened and they are on their way to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus turns to them and says, "who do people say that I am?" A good question at this point, right? Jesus wants to know, are people getting it? do they understand? And the disciples answer that people are calling him John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets.

But ah! Says Jesus. "Who do **you** say that I am?" And Peter says, "You are the Messiah!"

Good answer Peter! Jesus thinks he's catching on, so he begins to teach the disciples that the Son of Man, the Messiah, must go through extreme difficulties, must suffer, must endure rejection by all of the religious leadership of the day; and at the end of all that he must die—but that after three days he'd rise from the dead.

Whoa whoa whoa! Says Peter. What are you talking about—rejection and suffering and death? You shouldn't be saying such things—they can't be true!"

Oh Peter. What would we do without you?

Of course Jesus doesn't let him get by with this. After all, this is a pivotal moment in the spiritual growth of the disciples—is Jesus going to be able to depend on them when the going gets tough? Are they going to be able to keep the ministry going after Jesus is gone? Jesus says, 'Get behind me, Satan!' and goes on to say that by his answer Peter must be thinking not of God's intention but of his own skin, his own hopes and desires. We know that the expectation for the Messiah was that he would be a warrior king that would free Israel once again and lead them back to greatness. This is probably what Peter envisioned when he called Jesus "Messiah"—a new Israeli kingdom in the mold of David or Saul or Samuel. He never dreamed of a divine kingdom that would transcend all human events. Peter sees Jesus—with Peter himself by his side—leading the charge against Roman oppressors, into battle, sword drawn, victory and glory only a battle away. So what's all this talk about rejection, suffering and death? This isn't what Peter signed up for, and he lets Jesus know it in no uncertain terms. And Jesus pushes right back, rejecting Peter's vision for Jesus' ministry, rejecting the temptation to do anything besides what God has placed Jesus on earth to do. When Peter begins to rebuke Jesus he hears the voice of Satan just as he had during his time in the wilderness, when Satan tempted Jesus with the ability to turn stones to bread, to have power over the angels, to become a king over all the nations. And just as he did with Satan himself Jesus rejected the temptation to make the ministry about himself, his needs and the desires of those around him. And as with Satan, Jesus has an answer for Peter: if you are to follow me, you must set aside your own desires, you must get with the program and get behind me!

Oh snap Jesus!

It is interesting to note that the words in Greek used when Jesus tells Peter "get behind me Satan"—*opiso mou* (literally *behind me*)--are the same words that he uses in the next sentence, after "deny themselves" and "take up their cross" they must get *opiso mou*, behind me. When we read what Jesus says here, "if anyone wants to follow me they must deny themselves, take up their cross and

follow me” the second “follow me” seems a little unnecessary, doesn’t it? It even seems a little awkward in English—if you want to follow me, then you must follow me? The NIV translation says it a little differently—“whoever wants to be my disciple must...follow me” but we still don’t get the full significance of the Greek. The inference by Mark seems to be that following Jesus doesn’t mean you get a say in where you want to go, you must be behind Jesus all the way. On the website for the Center for Excellence in Preaching, Stan Mast says this:

...In the long run, everyone gets in line behind Jesus. He is the Cosmic Christ, the Creator, the firstborn from among the dead. No one will ever get out in front of Jesus. As King of kings and Lord of lords, he is the preeminent one. The only question is if you will be behind Jesus as a willing follower or if you will be back there because you got consigned there as a mini-Satan intent on tripping Jesus up.

As James and John found when they wanted to sit at the right and left hands of Jesus in heaven, there is no shared leadership in the ministry of Jesus. To be in his camp, we must follow or we must get out of the way. To do anything less is to hinder the ultimate ministry of Jesus, to keep his ultimate purpose—which is God’s ultimate purpose-- from being lived out.

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When we look at congregational life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we too are faced with temptations; and we have to figure out how to lead in this day and time. We hear over and over that we must be relevant, that we have to make ourselves appealing to one subgroup or another. We see Christians caught up in political struggles and the power that some seem to gain through this involvement. We wonder why so few people seem interested in what we have to offer any more—our programs, our dinners, our friendliness. Many books have been written about congregational leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and there are workshops and conferences held that are designed to try to help congregations who are struggling to understand who they are and how they can grow. Leaders are sought who will make the most of the church budget, who will work hard to develop activities designed to appeal to young people or retired people and so forth, who will teach the children and unload pumpkins from the tractor trailer and bring lots of goodies for after church social time--- and who will be able to motivate others to do the same. We expect a lot from our leaders, don’t we, in the church? And then we wonder why folks burn out and get discouraged and drop out of church life after they participate for awhile.

And all of these things are necessary to church life today, I'm not saying they're not important; but perhaps we all need to remember that while leadership in the church is important and we need leaders with certain qualities, perhaps the most important quality that church leaders need is the ability to follow Jesus, the ability to be ***opiso mou***—"behind me" as Jesus calls us to be, to be led by him not just in our church lives but in every aspect of our human life. We must set aside our own egos, our own desires, our own ideas about ministry and look to Jesus Christ, who gave his own life for our salvation and the salvation of the world. We must know firsthand the love of God in Christ Jesus, a love that led him to the cross, a love that transformed and is still transforming humanity. We must be able to share the love of Jesus Christ with a world that is very broken and full of suffering, hungry, lonely, broken individuals, broken as we are all broken.

In his book ***In the Name of Jesus***, priest, theologian and mystic Henri Nouwen says:

*Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance.*

In other words, in order to be good leaders, first we must be good followers. In order to feel the love of God in Christ we must spend time with God in prayer, in reflection and discussion, in discernment. We need to be leading not because our church needs to do things in order to grow or because our lives need fulfillment but because we love the God who came to us in the person of Jesus Christ and we know that God loves us as well, and we want to share that love with the rest of the world. Amen.