

THE UP AND DOWN APOSTLE  
Acts 5: 27-32

Last fall on October 18 our Synod group heard a sermon about Peter. Now that is not so usual on the face of it. But this sermon was different. It was delivered in Chinese at a large Protestant Church in Nanjing. It was given by an eloquent woman, the Vice President of the seminary just south of town. We listened through a translator to this sermon that lasted 45 minutes. Really. She pretty much told the whole story of Peter from his call at the Sea of Galilee to his martyrdom. Right then I made a mental note that someday I would like to preach a sermon about Peter. But shorter. A lot shorter.

Why Peter? Because Peter is so much like all of us. Maybe that is why Jesus chose him to be the leader of his followers. He is like us in this way—he is an up and down apostle. One day gung-ho and totally committed. The next? Not so much. And his down days are really pretty low. It is simply amazing that the early church was so very candid about her first and most important leader. They made no effort to idealize Peter. Just the opposite. He comes off as impetuous, hotheaded, vacillating, and at times an out and out liar. Now to be fair, he could also be an inspirational leader. It all depended upon the day in question.

This past week I read two books about Peter. That's the first time in my ministry that I have ever read so much about Peter! I was amazed that the New Testament devotes so much attention to Peter. He is mentioned almost two hundred times in the New Testament. Nine of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament refer to him. Now the two letters ascribed to Peter are of disputed authorship. Still, there is much about him, much that is immensely positive and much that is, well, brutally honest.

Nevertheless, this fickle, fearful, feckless fisherman is the leader of the band that followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. And Jesus willingly lavished immense amounts of time and energy on this uneducated working class laborer. Despite the many frustrations that Peter caused, Jesus devoted himself completely to his up and down follower. Maybe the only way to understand this is to recall all the frustrations our children have brought us. And yet we stick with them. We lavish them with attention. We love them with all our hearts, nevertheless. Why? Because they are our children. And Peter is a child of God, in every sense of the word. Indeed, the leader of the children of God. Ultimately he showed that he was absolutely worth it. In fact, Peter turned out in the grand scheme of things to be rather amazing. You know about Peter. Let me rehearse some of the highlights

and the low lights of his astonishing story. He would have been utterly forgotten like billions of other common folks had not Jesus walked by his fishing boat. When Jesus entered Peter's life, he stepped out of complete anonymity into a life he could never have imagined.

Soon after Peter left his boats to follow Jesus along with his brother Andrew, they entered Peter's home in Capernaum. There Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law. It was the first of many miracles Peter would witness. In fact, Peter himself would one day perform miracles as well.

Peter would speak for all the disciples as he answered Jesus' question at Caesarea Philippi, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter's answer got the words right, "You are the Messiah", but the music was all wrong. Peter would have nothing to do with a suffering Messiah and so Jesus rebukes his earnest follower with these stinging words, "Get behind me Satan." No one ever said a harsher word to Peter than the One who loved him the most. And yet Peter richly deserved it, he who would prevent Jesus from offering himself for the sins of the world.

Here's what is so maddening about Peter. He had a way of joining his best moments with his worst moments. It happened again at the Mount of Transfiguration. There Peter, James, and John saw Jesus glowing in supernatural light along with Moses and Elijah. Obviously at a loss, Peter comes up with the grand scheme of building three monuments for these great figures. At this point, the voice of God makes it clear what Peter is to do, "This is my beloved Son; listen to him." Once again at a moment of great revelation, Peter reveals that he doesn't have a clue. But he means well.

And of course we know that during the last week of Jesus' life Peter has some of his lowest moments. In John's Gospel Peter strenuously resists Jesus' washing his feet. But Jesus insists upon this solemn ritual of humility and Peter finally relents. Peter insists that though the other disciples may betray him, he will not. Famous last words, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you." It is then that Jesus reveals that Peter will deny him not once but three times.

Even in the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter cannot stay awake to pray with his Lord. And when Judas and the armed guards come for Jesus, Peter in great anger draws his sword and cuts off the ear of Malchus, the slave of the high priest. Jesus will have none of that. But then it gets worse. Around a campfire outside the high priest's home, Peter does in fact deny Jesus three times. And then he dissolves in tears. There would be plenty more tears to come as Jesus is led outside the walls of Jerusalem to die on a cross.

All that would change with the Resurrection of Jesus. In fact, the New Testament seems to point to Peter as the one to whom the Risen Christ first appears. And in that experience Peter is changed fundamentally. In fact, the Gospel of John has the risen Christ appear to Peter back on the Sea of Galilee

where he is re-commissioned with three repeated questions, “Simon, do you love me?” He answers, “Yes,” and so is told, “Feed my sheep.” And that is what Peter begins to do.

In the Acts of the Apostles we see the radically new version of Peter. He is bold and decisive. Three times he is jailed and twice he is miraculously sprung from his chains. He becomes the main preacher for this new movement of those who believe Jesus is the risen Messiah. Acts has him giving nine speeches. He announces how Judas’ position would be filled. He preaches to the huge crowd at Pentecost and then speaks to the crowd at the temple after healing a man. He twice defends himself before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish high court, including our reading from Acts 5. He fiercely rebukes the magician Simon Magus. After a vision he preaches to the Gentile Cornelius and then speaks to the other disciples about receiving this Gentile as a brother. Finally Peter addresses the Jerusalem Council about receiving Gentiles as full members into the Church. All in all, a remarkable transformation.

In our text from Acts 5 after his first miraculous escape from prison, Peter addresses the Sanhedrin. He had been warned to keep silent about Jesus. But with great conviction, Peter announces, “We must obey God rather human authority.” This is a very different Peter from the one who denied Jesus three times. Here he bears witness publicly and boldly that he is indeed a follower of Jesus. And not only that, he accuses the religious leaders of collaborating to crucify Israel’s king and savior. And then in his finest words, Peter says, “And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”

Peter’s bold accusation and forthright witness that the crucified Jesus is raised to the right hand of God utterly infuriates the religious leaders. In fact, these leaders are so mad they want to kill them. Only the cautious words of a respected Pharisee named Gamaliel prevents Peter from being executed on the spot. Peter escapes by the skin of his teeth after this inflammatory speech.

Now I wish I could end this short recitation of the life of Peter on this high note. But I conclude with a cautionary tale. As I said earlier, Peter is an up and down apostle. One of the last things we know about Peter is that he travels to Antioch in present day Syria. Remember that Peter has had a vision at Joppa where he is told to eat clean and unclean animals. That vision leads to his preaching to Cornelius and welcoming this Gentile into the Christian community. So at Antioch Peter initially ate with Gentile Christians. But then he drew back when some Jewish Christians came down from Jerusalem. In other words, he turned his back on Gentile Christians and withdrew in fear.

Paul tells us in the Galatian letter that when Peter would not eat with the Gentiles, there was a confrontation. Paul opposed Peter to his face and accused

him of hypocrisy. In fact, Paul accused Peter of not acting consistently with the truth of the Gospel. This was a stinging rebuke, not unlike the harsh words Jesus directed toward Peter at Caesarea Philippi. So Peter falls on his face yet again. It is another one of those down moments. Peter was very human, all too human, to the end of his life.

There is a clue in John 21 as to the fate of Peter. The Risen Christ speaks to Peter on the Sea of Galilee these mysterious words: "When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." And then the author of the Gospel of John adds these ominous words: "Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God." Church tradition says that Peter was indeed stretched out on a cross. Further, the tradition says that Peter requested that he be crucified upside down, because he was unworthy of being crucified in the same way, as was Jesus.

And so Peter ends his life bearing witness to Jesus. He loved Jesus until the end. However uncertain he was, whatever mistakes he made along the way, the grace of God attended him, changed him, and matured him. God never gave up on Peter. Throughout his circuitous journey of faith, Jesus remained patient with him. And over time Peter-with all his flaws and contradictions-experienced fully the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that made all the difference.

The story of Peter is a story for all of us. How God will not let us go and will not let us off the hook. That is our story as well. A grace that pursues us and changes us and matures us through all our ups and downs. The story of our faith journey is a story of God's unfailing love and infinite patience with people like Peter, people like us. Thanks be to God. Amen.