

Series: Joy in the Journey

Today: Peter

Text: John 21:15-19

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, April 25, 2010

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

Throughout this program year from September through May we have been focusing on the journeys of faith of men and women in the Bible. We have been attempting to understand how their journeys might inform our journeys.

Today we come to Peter, but Peter was not the name he was given at birth. His parents named him Simon. He was the brother of Andrew who was one of the first disciples to sense there was something special about the person of Jesus. Andrew heard Jesus teach, and he told his brother and his cousin that there was something in the way he spoke that made him different from all of the other teachers who were roaming Palestine at the time of Jesus. It was Jesus who gave Simon a new name and honored the faith that he saw in him. He was no longer Simon, but Peter; a name which means “rock.”

The story of his new name is in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 16). Jesus and his disciples were traveling through the district of Caesarea Phillipi. Jesus asked his disciples what people were saying about him. They told him that some thought he was a prophet like Elijah or Jeremiah. Then he turned to them and put them on the spot: *Who do you say that I am?* It was Simon who spoke first: *You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God.*

It was then that Jesus gave Simon his new name. He called him Peter, the Rock. He said, *“Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”* (Matthew 16:17-18)

The rock to which Jesus referred was the faith of Peter which allowed him to believe that Jesus was more than a prophet; that he was the Messiah; God's chosen one. The Roman Catholic Church has taken that one verse as its rationale for the papacy, but there is more to Peter than that one verse, and that is what we want to explore this morning.

Peter is not so much famous for his devotion to Jesus as he is for his lack of it. You remember the story we told a few weeks ago during Lent when Jesus was being tried for blasphemy, it was Peter who waited outside and denied even knowing him. Apparently he did not want to die alongside of Jesus, and it was perhaps the low point of his life. It may be why, when it came time for Peter to die, some 30 years later, tradition says he felt unworthy to die as Jesus had died, and he asked to be crucified upside down.

There is much to learn from Peter's journey of faith, but if we concentrate on the text this morning, I would like to suggest two things which are revealed: 1) Where Christ Meets Us; and 2) What Christ Asks of Us.

Where Christ Meets to Us

Peter was, by profession, a fisherman, and I found it interesting that when he first met Jesus and in this final meeting he is doing what he does the best. He is fishing. He was fishing when Jesus called him to be one of the inner circle of twelve disciples, and he is fishing when he encounters Jesus for the last time. It is not in some holy place like a church or a cathedral, nor is it in some remote area when he was on a spiritual retreat. It isn't even when he was studying the Bible. He meets Jesus right where he works. He is fishing.

So the first thing we need to learn from Peter's journey of faith is not be surprised if God meets us in the midst of our routine. If we believe that God is reaching out to us all the time, all we need to do is be sensitive to the reality that God is always calling us to faithfulness. In the

midst of the everydayness of life of our lives, God is trying to get us to pay attention to what God is doing in the world and inviting us to join in.

When the terrorists attacked the World Trade towers on September 11, 2001 it was touching the ways in which people found to support one another in their grief. Even companies who had been competitors found a way to reach out and help their employees cope with the shock of what had happened. In one of my files I came upon the story of one company which invited the employees of one of its competitors, which had been decimated by the attack, to share office space following the attacks. On the morning before the employees would begin the office sharing arrangement, the head of security told the existing employees why these people were alive and their colleagues had perished. All of the stories were about the *little things* in life we take for granted.

The President of the company which had lost so many employees was not there that day because his son was starting kindergarten and he didn't want to miss it. Another fellow was alive because it was his turn to bring the donuts, and he had stopped just long enough to keep him from being on the floor where one of the planes hit. One woman was late because her alarm clock didn't go off; another because of traffic on the New Jersey Turnpike; another missed his bus. One spilled food on her clothes and had taken time to change. Someone else went back to answer the telephone. A particularly poignant story was of the man who put on a new pair of shoes that morning and had formed a blister, stopped to buy and band aid, and because he stopped to take care of that need, he is alive today.

The point is that our lives can change in an instant, and that God is always attempting to break through our defenses and get us to pay attention to what is really important in life. It is not just in church that we encounter the holy in life. It isn't just in church that Jesus Christ meets us

and asks us to follow him. It is in the midst of the daily routine of our life where Christ meets us most profoundly. Look for him there.

What Christ Asks of Us

The second lesson we need to look at is what Christ asks of us. He asks Peter a question three times and three different ways, and the question is this: *Do you love me?* Peter's answer is the same every time: "*Yes Lord, you know that I love you.*" And Jesus responds differently on each occasion.

The first time Jesus asks the question he adds a qualifier: *Do you love me more than these?* Than these what; these fish? Jesus has invited the disciples to breakfast, but Peter is too busy counting the fish. The Bible says there were 153 fish caught that day. How do we know that there were 153 and not 155? Somebody had to count them, and one preacher has suggested that Peter was have been so busy counting the fish (making his living) that he didn't even pay attention to the call of Jesus.

The word that Jesus uses for love is the highest form of love one person can have for another. Do you *agape* me more than these? Is your love the kind of self-emptying, self-sacrificing love which is concerned about the welfare of others before it is concerned about one's own welfare? So the first question to Peter is, *do you love me enough to put down your own agenda of what is important and listen to me?*

Maybe that is what Jesus is asking of you today? Which is more important? Is it your to-do list, or your relationship with Jesus Christ? Is it your work, or your relationship with Jesus Christ? Is it your family, or your relationship with Jesus Christ?

Before we are too harsh on Peter, perhaps we need to be honest with ourselves. Most of us have something which gets in our way when we are asked to consider where our relationship with Jesus Christ is on our priority list. “*Do you love me more than ____ (fill in the blank)?*”

Last Friday and Saturday I spent 30 hours with 50 men on a retreat focusing on men’s spirituality. We were all different ages and at different stages in our lives, but we held one thing in common. The world in which we live provides us with too many distractions from things we think are important, and because we are so busy, it is easy to forget what is really important.

The retreat leader began the retreat with the story of a nomadic tribe in Africa which travels for two days at a time and then stops for a day. When an observer asked why they stopped when they hadn’t reached their destination, the medicine man said, “*We stop to allow our souls to catch up to our bodies.*”

This is what Jesus was asking of Peter. Do you love me more than these? Do you love me more than the distractions of your career? Do you love me more than the family that I have given you? Do you love me more than the drink you have in your hand. Do you love me more than these?

Jesus asks the question a second time, but this time he leaves off the qualifier? “*Do you love me?*” he asks. He uses the same word: *agape*. He is asking Peter about the quality of his love. Is it the kind of love that is going to go the distance; when the going really gets tough? Is he willing to put aside his own life agenda long enough to embrace God’s agenda for his life?

I don’t mean to embarrass Dan Snyder, but on Wednesday of this past week Dan met with our Session to be interviewed by them and to be recommended to the Presbytery of Donegal as a candidate for ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. He told the Session a funny story about his sense of call.

He had been struggling for some time with a career decision about how he was to use the many gifts God has given him. Dan is a graduate of Lancaster Bible College, and he has served as a pastor of an independent church which does not require its pastors to go to seminary. After about 10 years of service, he became frustrated with the restrictive nature of the church he was serving, and he left the ministry to seek a new career.

Dan has been involved with Ross Elementary School for several years as a concerned parent. He knew he loved children, and he enjoyed being around the school, so he had decided that teaching might be a good profession to pursue. It seemed a logical choice until one day he was substituting for a class of first graders and discovered that he was exhausted by the end of the day. He thought to himself if this was what he had to look forward to every day, perhaps his choice of a new career was misguided.

That weekend he was to be a retreat leader for one of our sister churches in the Presbytery, and he went to them exhausted. However, as he led that retreat, he found himself gaining more and more energy. By the end of the weekend he knew that the church was the place he was to exercise the gifts God had given him.

The following week he had his annual review with me, and in the midst of the conversation I challenged him to consider a call to become a pastor in the PCUSA. I was honest with him about what it would require—three years of his life attending seminary; passing five standardized examinations like the Bar exam that attorneys have to pass; writing countless answers to countless questions by the Session and the Presbytery's Committee on Preparation for Ministry.

He told me he didn't think he could do that to his family, but he said he would pray about it. A week later he told me that he and his wife, Chris, had prayed, and they had both felt God's

call and he was ready to give up his agenda and get on God's agenda. For the last two years Dan has been a straight-A student at Lancaster Theological Seminary, and if all goes well he will be ordained sometime next summer.

Do you love me? Are you willing to make a sacrifice for me? Are you willing to lay your own agenda aside and get on God's agenda? Jesus asks Peter this question, but Peter is not up to the task. As he did the first time, he answers that he is willing to be love him as a friend, but agape love is more than he can handle. What about you? Are you willing to make a sacrifice for Jesus, or are you only able to be a friend?

Finally, Jesus asks Peter a third time: "*Do you love me?*" However, this time he changes the word. Instead of agape, he uses the word phileo. Do you love me like you love all of your other friends? And finally Peter can say, without equivocation, "*Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you (like I love all my other friends).*"

It is then that Jesus accepts what Peter can offer at the time. It is as if he is saying, "*I had hoped for more, but I will meet you right where you are. However, the time is coming when you will understand what I am asking of you, and it will lead to your death which you will die willingly because of your love for me.*"

This is the way it is for some of us; perhaps for most of us. We give Jesus the love we can, and we listen with Peter as Jesus says "*I had hoped for more, but I will meet you right where you are. Now follow me.*" And as we follow him, we are able to give more of ourselves to the more we know of God.

Conclusion

As I have preached this text, I realize that the question which Jesus asked Peter is not an "asked and answered" question. It is one which requires us to do an inventory of our lives and

ask ourselves if we have our priorities in order. That changes at every stage of life we are in. When we are young, we are chasing after career and success. In the middle of our lives we are tempted by all that success or failure can do to distract us from what is really important. And in our later years we may be so consumed by the questions of survival—our investments, our health, our living circumstance – that we lose our focus on what is really important. So hear Jesus speak to you today: *Do you love me more than these?*