

Called by Name: Peter and Progressing in the Life of Faith

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Mark 8:37-35, Mark 9:2-9

Today our sermon series on the 12 Disciples continues with a look at the best known disciple of all, Simon Peter. Peter is mentioned more times in the Gospels and Acts than any of the rest of the disciples. The stories in which Peter appears reveal him as a man of action who is quick to speak. In our two texts for today, you get a sense of that. Listen first for how Peter gets it right and then almost immediately get it wrong about Jesus.

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

*Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, **he rebuked Peter** and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'*

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

After that episode, which goes on to conclude with Jesus saying, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God has come with power" the very next passage in Mark's gospel is the one assigned for today, which is Transfiguration Sunday on the liturgical calendar.

Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.' He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!' Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.*

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

I am not sure that there is a better Sunday for a baptism than on the day we mark Transfiguration Sunday. Because what baptism is, be it for infants, children or adults, is a sort of mountaintop moment.

There is a declaration from on high that this is a beloved child of God. Often, not always but often, the one to be baptized is clothed in white—like Jesus is in the story we just read—but slightly less dazzling and without Moses and Elijah on either side. In this case, parents and pastors have to do. A baptism is the kind of thing you want to celebrate and capture on film, or at least store away in memory. So while we don't build three dwelling or construct shrines to mark the occasion, we take pictures, and light candles, and throw receptions. It's a big moment.

Then when the moment is over, like Peter (and James and John), what remains is only Jesus and the command to listen to him. Listen to Jesus' call to a life lived in love, Jesus' words that whatever we did to the least of these we did to Him. Only Jesus. Jesus who invites us into communities of discipleship like Immanuel. Jesus, who goes with us down the mountain and into the valleys of real life, with its joys but also big challenges and thorny issues, complicated relationships and children who get sick and need care sometimes. Just like the one Jesus and his disciples would encounter when they came down the mountain.

Transfiguration Sunday is the perfect Sunday for a baptism because it, in its way, reminds us that life of faith doesn't stop on the mountain, as much as we would like it to sometimes. The life of faith is a life-long process of learning and growing.

That was certainly a lesson Simon Peter had to learn, and learn it, he did. It took him a while, however.

I'll bet if I took a survey asking which disciple is your favorite, more than 80 percent of the respondents would say Peter. He's certainly the best known. And he's just so impulsive, so brash, so flawed, so, well, *human*.

What a *Real World, Real Faith* talk Peter could give!

Peter is the one who leaves his nets behind to follow Jesus and Peter is the first of the disciples, at least in the first three Gospels, to claim that Jesus is the Messiah.

Peter's the one who is bold enough to try to walk on water to get to Jesus, only sinking when he takes his eyes off his Lord.

Peter is the one who tells Jesus in the Upper Room, "You'll never wash my feet!" which was not only his way of saying, "I should be washing yours", but also his way of saying, "Eeeeaaah. I'm not sure I like this servant leadership thing you're telling us about."

Peter is the one who resorts to violence in the garden, pulling his sword and chopping off the ear of the high priest's slave, only to get rebuked by Jesus for doing so.

Peter is the one who confidently tells Jesus that he'll never, not in a million years, deny knowing him, and then finds himself in the courtyard of the high priest on the night of Jesus' trial, sitting at a charcoal fire and denying three times, with all of his heart, that he's ever met the man, only to dissolve in tears when the cock crows.

Peter is the one who races John to the tomb to find it empty, and Peter is the one who, after the resurrected Jesus has breathed on them and sent them out into the world to do his work, tells the rest of the disciples that he's going back to fishing.

And when Jesus shows up, Peter is the one who puts clothes on (that's weird) to jump into the water and swim to shore, where the resurrected Jesus feeds them a breakfast of fish that he's cooked on a charcoal fire, the same sort of fire Peter was sitting around in the high priest's courtyard.

And then Peter is the one whom Jesus asks three times, "Simon, do you love me?" And each time, when Peter says, "You know that I love you," Jesus responds, "Feed my sheep then."

Peter, the bold, brash, impulsive one, finds himself humbled on more than one occasion.

One thing you can say about Peter throughout scripture is that he's fully engaged. You don't have to guess about where Peter stands, right or wrong. Simon the Rock just lays it all out there.

Take, for instance, on the road to Caesarea Philippi. He confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. Then, when Jesus starts to explain what that's going to mean, and Peter doesn't like what he's hearing – chiefly that Jesus being Messiah means he's going to be vulnerable, that he's going to suffer and die and be raised – it doesn't fit with Peter's concept of what a Messiah should be, or at least what should happen to his master and friend. Peter is has the temerity to rebuke Jesus, which is when he gets an earful right back, when Jesus turns and looks at the rest of the disciples and then, as if to say, "Let this be an example for the whole class", chastises Peter, "Get behind me, Satan!"

That's Peter for you. Not afraid to speak up. Not afraid to engage.

He even speaks up when he doesn't know what the heck to say, which is why, in the face of the transcendent mystery of Jesus turning dazzling white and being flanked by Moses and Elijah, Peter feels like he has to say SOMETHING and out comes the "let us build three dwelling places here" thing.

You know, it's not always necessary when there's silence to come up with something to fill it. Sometimes it is okay, when we don't have anything to say, to not say anything. Who knows why Peter wanted to build three dwellings. Maybe, after the whole thing he's just heard about Jesus suffering and dying, Peter wants to stay put for a while, just to dwell in the glow. Who can blame him?

But disciples of Jesus do not get made on the mountaintop.

Let me say that again.

Disciples of Jesus do not get made on the mountaintop.

They may get started there, but that's not where disciples get made.

They get made in the learning and growing and struggling and wrestling that happens in the valley as well. If the story of Peter is about anything, it is about how a flawed human being gets transformed into a vessel of God's powerful vulnerability in Christ. It's a lifelong journey. It doesn't stop.

Here are two keys to making that happen. Keys that I think we can pick up from Peter.

One, **be fully engaged.**

It's already been established that Peter didn't get it right all the time. He muffed the answers. He made missteps. But he was there. He kept the conversation going. When he heard something he didn't like, he didn't scrap the whole faith thing or go on to some other source.

In fact, in John's gospel, Peter is the one who on another mountain, after Jesus has been telling people that he is the bread of life and then turns to at the 12 disciples after everybody else has left and asks, "Okay, guys. Are you going to go now, too? Now that I've talked about how hard this stuff is?"

Peter is the one who says, "But where else can we turn? You have the words of eternal life."

We grow in faith—we grow in our ability to trust and follow the God we know in Jesus into places of vulnerability and service—by engaging the message of the gospel and the community of fellow followers and the relationships we've forged—not by casting them aside.

How many lives have I seen changed for the better through people hanging in there, and not giving up? Not giving up on the Gospel. Not giving up on relationships. How many lives have I seen changed for the better because children grew up challenged by and nurtured in the church?

There's a second key to learning and growing on this journey of faith, a key to being transformed as the flawed human beings that we are. That second key is to be humble.

Peter is not the first example of humility that a person would choose. He's the one who boldly says what he thinks and believes. At some points, Peter is anything but humble. He's is an example of pride and overconfidence and **lack** of humility. Peter says what he thinks, and in the moment, he's sure of it.

Last week Katie had us fill out cards with doubts that we have on one side and our certainties on the other. Peter had a bunch of certainties. He didn't have a lot of doubts. Not until he found himself in the garden, denying that he knew Jesus three times. Not until he came face-to-face with the fact that he was human. That's when he was humbled. That's when he learned that he didn't have it all figured out.

That's the key, I think, to living and growing in the life of faith, the ability to admit to ourselves that we don't have it all figured out. Life is a journey.

I love the *Peanuts* cartoon where Charlie Brown comes up to Snoopy, sitting on top of his red dog house, just typing away.

Charlie says to Snoopy, "I hear you're writing a book on theology. I hope you have a good title."

The little thought bubble that comes up from Snoopy reads, "I have the perfect title. *Has it ever occurred to you that you might be wrong?*"

That's a lesson in humility that Peter kept learning through living life in the valley. There's a marvelous story in the book of Acts where Peter, on the rooftop of Simon the Tanner's house in Joppa, has a vision of a blanket being lowered from heaven. On that blanket there were all sorts of animals that a good observant Jewish person was not supposed to eat. Three times, Peter hears a voice from on high saying, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." Three times—three is important for Peter—he confidently replies, "I'm not supposed to eat that, it's unclean." And the voice says, "I don't care what the book says. What God has called clean, you must not call unclean." So when Cornelius, a Roman soldier shows up looking to be baptized, Peter doesn't turn him away. Because he was open to the lesson in the vision.

Another aspect of humility is not ever feeling like we've fully arrived, not being self-satisfied with our learning, accomplishments and achievements. There is always room for growth. There are always new things to learn.

For instance, I think the great danger in the Hypothermia Project that we did right before Christmas is to say, "Wow! Look at what we did! We pulled this off as a church. We had fifty homeless people stay in our meeting house! Wonderful! Isn't that awesome! *{Patting self on back}*."

If we stop there, that is the perfect example of the lack of humility that I'm talking about. It's a life-long journey and we can't stop and be satisfied on the mountaintops.

There is in the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 step groups an idea about how it works. How does it work that people live and grow and get free of addiction? How does it work that people get sober and stay that way?

I've been in some of those rooms with my father.

When they talk about how it works, they break it down to H O W.

How.

Honest. Honest with other people but more importantly honest with ourselves.

Open. Open to what life might be teaching us and open to what are people are trying to say to us.

And willing. Willing to put in the work that it takes to get and stay sober.

It's really all about being humbled. That's how you learn and grow and that's how you follow in Jesus' way.

When I hit 50 years old a year and a half ago, I thought, "Okay. I'm pretty good. I've got this life and faith thing pretty well figured out."

It is amazing to me how much I've learned in the past year and a half or so. In Jesus' name. Amen.